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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is a guide for teachers who need to distinguish learning difficulties due either to a disability or to limited English proficiency. In narrative and charts, the pamphlet addresses the following topics: how children with limited English fit into the special education picture; how quickly a child typically learns a second language; factors that affect second language learning; comparing characteristics of language minority students and exceptional children; assessing effectiveness of a teacher in a culturally diverse classroom; language differences commonly observed among Spanish speakers learning English; language differences commonly noted among Asian speakers of English; common language differences among Arabic speaking English learners; and ways to help students with limited English proficiency. (DB)

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Language Differences and the Special Education Referral Question: Points of Consideration for Teachers

By
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April 1994

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Language Differences and the Special Education Referral Question:

Points of Consideration for Teachers

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What is Special Education, anyway?

Special Education provides a wide range of instructional services for individuals from birth to age 22 who qualify under legal guidelines as individuals with a disability which impedes their learning process to a significant degree. Federal law and corresponding state laws define what constitutes a disability.

Does every child who demonstrates difficulty learning at his grade level have a disability?

A disability is defined in the Federal and state laws. The disabilities identified under I.D.E.A. include the following: Autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, other health impairments, severe/profound disability, specific learning disability, speech/language impairment, traumatic brain injury and visual impairment. Not every child who has difficulty learning meets the criteria for a disability that requires special education. There are many factors which can affect a child's learning very powerfully, but they do not all indicate a disability. The law clearly says that a child shall not be found eligible if the determining factor is limited English proficiency.

Then how do kids with limited English fit into the Special Education picture? Many of them have a great deal of difficulty learning in our schools and end up quite behind!

Recent research indicates that 19% of students labeled "Learning Disabled" in urban school districts between 1984 and 1993 were foreign born, and that 44% were from homes where English was not the primary language. Both of these levels are much higher than the expected range among special education students. This clearly suggests that the language issue is seen as a disability itself! However, misidentifying the factors that are contributing to

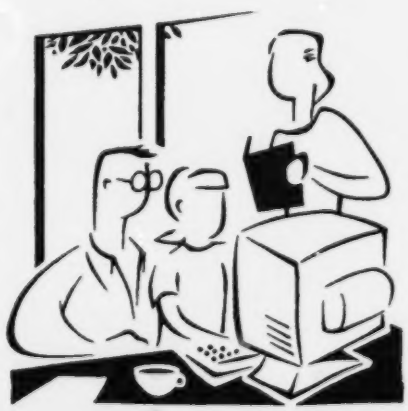
learning or school performance difficulties can only lead to inappropriate intervention. Thus it is important to distinguish whether a language difference or a learning deficit is the real issue.

How quickly does a child learn a second language?

It takes about two years in an ideal situation for the second language learner to develop a level of proficiency known as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) that is commensurate with the native speaker. However, it takes between five and seven years to develop a level that is native-like for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). This period of time is typical for students who come from an enriched background. Studies done in the U.S. show that students took between three and six years to perform at the 50th Percentile in English in academic areas when they were instructed in both languages. This level requires language use that does not rely on meaningful situational cues and paralinguistic gestures. Instead, it relies almost totally on linguistic cues for meaning. This is the type of language use of the classroom. If the child can communicate adequately at the BICS level, we may erroneously assume that CALP is also adequate. This should not result in a special education referral, but rather a referral for bilingual education or ESL assistance.

What other factors affect second language learning?

1. Access to English speaking peers.
2. Personality traits such as extroversion or motivation.
3. Chronological age.
4. Primary language learning.
5. Societal attitudes toward primary language.
6. Intelligence
7. The inter-relationships of all of these factors.



Comparing Characteristics of Language Minority Students and Exceptional Children

TRAIT	ENGLISH LEARNER	SPECIAL LEARNER
Communicative Skills	Normal language learning potential. May have L1 interference in voice or articulation. Can communicate to function in society.	May exhibit speech/ language disorders in articulation, voice fluency, receptive/ expressive language. May not achieve communication competence.
Language Skills	Primary language skills appropriate for age. Non-verbal skills are age appropriate. Sentence structures and grammar may show great variation.	May lack understanding / expression, as demonstrated through vocab and word retrieval, following directions, sentence formation and pragmatics.
Sensory Functioning	Usually normal	Auditory and/or visual processing deficits may be present.
Health	No significant health factors but possible developmental factors in cultural context.	May have a history or risk in infancy, ear infections / hearing problems, sleeping or eating disturbances, incontinence or family history of learning problems.
Cognitive Abilities	Although there are apparent problems, ability is normal. May score better on non-verbal tests.	Average to above, except when mental retardation is present.

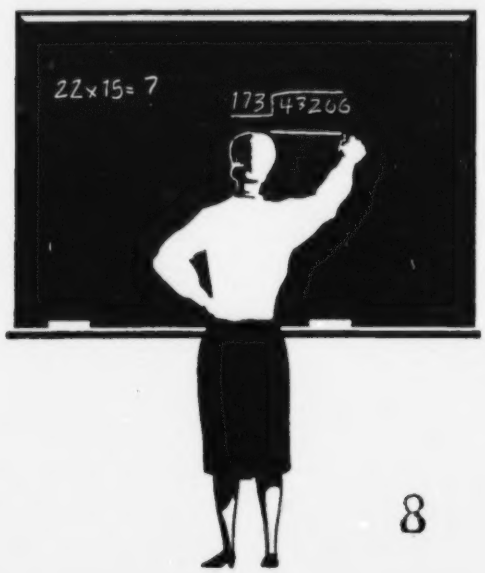
TRAIT	ENGLISH LEARNER	SPECIAL LEARNER
Academics	Normal potential but some issues of culturally determined learning style or perceptual strategies.	Usually below grade level. Often discrepancies between ability and achievement.
Progress	Depends on adequacy of language instruction. DURING LANGUAGE TRANSITION, English performance may lag.	May vary but can show positive response to tasks taught sequentially through high levels of student teacher interaction.
Productivity	Limited English proficiency may result in following directions poorly, and slow initiation or transitions.	Lack of understanding of direction or how to address them. May show embarrassment or dependence.
Affective Factors	Usually normal. May be more interactive with own cultural group.	May show frequent fights or arguments. Akwardness.
Cause of Perceived Disabilities	Extrinsic causes	Intrinsic causes

Assessing Your Effectiveness as a Teacher in a Culturally Diverse Classroom

Ask yourself these questions...

- Do I have an understanding of the cultures in my class?
- Am I aware of culture-based learning styles?
- Are my expectations equally high for all of my students?
- Do I actively seek to engage ALL students in learning activities?
- Do I actively seek to give appropriate attention and encouragement to ALL my students?
- Do I seek to learn more about diversity?
- Am I willing to identify my own biases?
- Do I use methods which promote integration?
- Does my instruction conflict with cultural beliefs of my students?
- Do I use many means of and approaches to assessment to avoid inadvertent bias in assessment of progress?

Now, assess what <u>you</u> need to do <u>while</u> you assess what the student needs to do!



Language Differences Commonly Observed Among Spanish Speakers Learning English

Language Characteristic	Sample of English
Adjective comes after noun	The house green.
's is often omitted in plurals and possessives	The girl book is. Juan his is red.
Past tense-ed often omitted	We walk yesterday.
Double negatives are required	I don't have no more.
Superiority is demonstrated by using *mas*	This cake is more big.
The adverb often follows the verb	He drives very fast the bike.

Language Difference Commonly Noted Among Asian Speakers of English

Language Characteristics	Sample English Utterance
Omission of plurals	Here are 2 piece of toast.
Omission of copula	He going home now.
Omission of possessive	Mom food is cold.
Past tense double marking	He didn't went by himself.
Double negative	They don't have no books.
Subject-verb-object relationship differences/omissions	I messed up it. He like.
Singular present tense omission or addition	You goes inside. He go to the store.
Misordering of interrogatives	You are going now?
Misuse or omission of prepositions	She is in home. He goes to school 8:00.
Misuse of pronouns	She husband is coming. She said her wife is here.
Omission and/or overgeneralization of articles	Boy is sick. He went the home.
Incorrect use of comparatives	This book is gooder than that.
Omission of conjunctions	You ____I going to the beach.
Omission, lack of inflection of auxiliary "do"	She ____ not take it. He do not have enough.
Omission, lack of inflection w / have	She have no money.

Some Common Language Differences Among Arabic Speaking English Learners

Articulation Characteristics	Sample English Utterance
n / ng substitution	son/ song, nothin / nothing
sh / ch substitution	mush / much, shoe / chew
w / v substitution	west / vest, Walerie / Valerie
f / v substitution	fife / five, abofe / above
t / voiceless "th" substitution	bat / bath, noting / nothing
s / voiceless 'th" substitution	sing / thing, somsing / something
z / voiced "th" substitution	brozer / brother, zese / these
Retroflex / r / doesn't exist	Speaker of Arabic will use a tap or trilled / r /
No triple consonant cluster in Arabic	harduhly / hardly
o / a substitutions	hole / hall, bowl / ball
o / oi substitutions	bowl / boil
a / uh substitutions	snuch / snack, ruch / rack
ee / i substitutions	sheep / chip, sheep / ship

Language Characteristics	Possible English Errors
Omission of possessives's and "of"	That Kathy book. The title the story is…
Omission of plurals	She has 3 pen.
Omission of prepositions	Put your shoes.
Omission of form "to be"	She ___my friend.
Inversion of noun constructs	I got to the station gas.

Helping Students with Limited English Proficiency

1. Students with LEP may not know the right words to use when they are answering questions. Before teaching each lesson point out new and important vocabulary, especially by using words in relevant contexts.
2. Sometimes the students know the answer but say things in a way that is hard for the teacher to understand. When you realize that a student is having difficulty expressing a correct answer, let him or her know that the answer is basically correct.
3. Make explicit your expectations for a good verbal response such as using appropriate words, including details and description, giving complete well-organized answers, giving a thoughtful answer rather than guessing and giving the correct answer. Make a list of these qualities. As students answer, identify their strengths in the response.
4. If you cannot understand a student's English, try one of these techniques: 1) Repeat what the student says with a questioning intonation to check your comprehension or 2) tell the student that you do not understand.
5. Rephrase your questions and the answers other children give so that the LEP students have more than one opportunity to understand what is said. For example, change questions that require full content answers into questions that give students a simpler choice.
6. When a student's grammar is incorrect, focus on the content of what the child says and respond to the meaning while modeling the correct form.
7. For students who do not actively participate in class discussions, check to see if different cultural habits for classroom participation might be the cause. Remember that LEP children can understand before they can speak. Their seemingly passive role may mask their active role in attending to and learning from the interactions in class.

So, Now What Do I Do?

1. Make good use of your school based assistance team or child study committee. Seek help from the experts in the system and ask for resources that may help you help your students who have language differences.
2. Document what you see as clearly as you can, especially in relation to language. Use the guidelines of this pamphlet and other resources available to help you to define the picture that you see specifically. This will also help those who are resources to you. Document your observations using verbs rather than adjectives: document what the child does.
3. Seek dual language or ESL assessment so that you understand how the child is now functioning with English and if language problems themselves appear in the native language.
4. Be creative and use alternatives for presentation AND for assessment so that you can get a clearer picture of what the child is learning, in spite of language differences.
5. Remember everyone learns differently, and we all bring our own particular combination of strengths and weaknesses to class. Appreciate what everyone brings and appreciate your own knowledge and creativity in solving learning problems for all of your students.
6. Refer a student who demonstrates learning differences beyond limitations in English language proficiency. Share your documentation and knowledge of the student with the assessment team.

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